



BLUEPRINT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND SCHOOL REFORM SUBMISSION

16 May 2008

*'Promoting the healthy development of children is both an ethical imperative and a critical economic and social investment. A decent and wise society protects and nurtures all its children [and young people], particularly those [who experience] disadvantage, so that they grow up to be productive adults and because it's the right thing to do.'*¹

Phillips and Schonkoff, 2000

Introduction

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria. VCOSS works to ensure that all Victorians have access to and a fair share of the community's resources and services, through advocating for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

VCOSS members reflect a wide diversity, with members ranging from large charities, sector peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals in social policy debates.

VCOSS Vision

VCOSS is committed to living out the principles of equity and justice, and acknowledges we live in a society where people are interdependent of one another. VCOSS respects the land we live in and recognises the Indigenous custodians of the country. VCOSS is committed to reconciling all injustices with Indigenous Australians.

The VCOSS vision is one where social well being is a national priority, and:

- Ensures everyone has access to and a fair share of the community's resources and services
- Involves all people as equals, without discrimination; and
- Values and encourages people's participation in decision making about their own lives and their community.

Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform

VCOSS and VCOSS members have a strong interest in early childhood development and education, particularly in relation to children, young people and their families who are vulnerable and / or who experience disadvantage. This is because participation in quality, accessible early years services and education is fundamental for individuals' economic and social participation, as well as promoting economic growth and breaking intergenerational cycles of disadvantage; and strengthening the capacity of communities.

VCOSS values the opportunity to contribute and believes that the *Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform* (the *Blueprint*) has the potential to achieve:

- The development of a cohesive framework to support and promote the wellbeing, learning, health and development of children and young people and their families;
- Greater integration across the education and care continuum;
- Strengthened linkages between all services that support and promote the learning, health, development and wellbeing of children and young people.

VCOSS believes that the reforms will be better achieved through the development of a single *Blueprint*, rather than through having two separate Blueprints. A single *Blueprint* establishes a whole of government and whole of service system framework to facilitate and enhance the development of a strengthened and integrated approach to the learning, wellbeing, health and development of all Victorian children and young people.

At the core of the *Blueprint* is a conceptual framework that focuses on the creation of a framework and a support system where children and young people thrive, learn and grow. This concept should be at the core of all government departments and agencies so as to best facilitate the achievement of this goal. The implementation of such a conceptual framework focusing on reforms which support and promote the wellbeing, learning, health and development of children and young people requires improved whole of government action, particularly greater integration and strengthened linkages across all government policy and service areas. Such integration and linkages need to extend from early childhood services, schools, family support, health, and police, to housing, mental health, drug and alcohol, disability, domestic violence, and transport services, to broader community strengthening infrastructure such as neighbourhood houses. In order to move to a whole of government framework, it is crucial that there is inter-divisional and inter-departmental integration to effectively promote and support the wellbeing of children, young people and families. It is not sufficient to focus only on those portfolios that fall within the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development if real, sustainable change is to be achieved for Victorian children and young people.

VCOSS welcomes the recognition in the *Blueprint* that significant reforms are required in the way DEECD, schools and other services work to be able to more effectively respond to disadvantage and promote wellbeing. As identified by Jake Chapman in his two *System failure* publications:

‘the current model of public policy making, based on the reduction of complex problems into separate, rationally manageable components, is no longer appropriate to the challenges faced by governments and changes to the wider environment in which they operate.’

Implementing a systems practice involves significant change from the traditional approach and processes employed by government. This is evident ‘in that:

- ❑ interventions would be based upon learning what works, on an ongoing basis, rather than specifying targets to be met.
- ❑ the priority would be to improve overall system performance, as judged by the end-users of the system not just by Ministers or civil servants
- ❑ the policy making process would focus on the processes of improvement, rather than the control of the agencies involved
- ❑ engagement with agents and stakeholders would be based more upon listening and co-researching rather than on telling and instructing. Responsibility for innovation and improvement would be widely distributed.¹²

The *Blueprint* provides the framework to drive the significant change required across government to better support and promote the wellbeing, learning, health and development of children and young people and their families

VCOSS welcomes the intention in the *Blueprint* to drive significant systems change across all the systems and structures that support and promote the wellbeing, learning, health and development of children and young people. There is clear evidence that a child’s or young person’s learning does not occur in isolation from the other parts of their life. However the traditional school structure, model and approach responds as if this is the case. The collective challenge that the *Blueprint* needs to respond to, is to identify and develop collaborative networks between schools and other sectors to improve the learning outcomes for students, particularly those who experience disadvantage.

VCOSS believes that the development of cross-sector, collaborative networks are a key way to overcome disadvantage. This is particularly so in the area of education: there are significant opportunities to improve learning outcomes through addressing the social factors that negatively impact on a child’s or young person’s ability to learn. The quality of the child’s environment as a whole is important to educational success and improved social outcomes.

Schools and other universal early childhood services are the ideal entry point for the provision of additional support and enabling linkages, as for many families, schools and services such as maternal and child health and child care, are the only formal institutions that they engage with. However schools are naturally focused primarily on the educational needs of children and young people. To address the social needs of children and young people, it is critical that schools are networked and integrated with a range of other community services and structures. Such new approaches are required to enable the improved integration of education and broader community organisations and structures.

The *Blueprint* needs to drive the development of a more collaborative-based system that actively supports the learning outcomes of all students, particularly those who experience disadvantage. The development of collaborative networks that are focused on supporting and enabling the learning outcomes of all students, particularly those who experience disadvantage, requires two key steps. Firstly, it is

vital to draw together the full range of resources that affect the learning and development of children. Such a step is critical as the evidence highlights that the quality of a child's or young person's environment as a whole – at home, in care, at school, in the community – is central to supporting their learning and development. The second step is ensuring the management of school resources and learning models are more flexible and include the capacity to be locally-driven so as to more effectively respond to the diversity of need.

As part of driving the development of more collaborative networks, the *Blueprint* needs to ensure the development of new ways of working that give privilege to innovation. Such steps require all stakeholders, including government, accepting that everything tried will not be successful, and that – importantly – there will be learnings to be gained from these as well as the successful initiatives. To enable this, mechanisms need to be established that enable case studies of what works and what hasn't been effective to be shared across the community, education and government sectors.

The *Blueprint* needs to include a central government policy framework that clearly articulates a broad direction and which enables local flexibility and adaptability. A central policy framework should provide a broad direction with minimum specifications, and should:

- clearly establish the direction of change with defined broad outcome goals;
- establish targets and specify core evaluation requirements based around these broad outcome goals;
- explicitly allow for innovation and experimentation with cause and effect;
- set boundaries that cannot be crossed by any implementation strategy;
- allocate resources, but without specifying how they should be used – resource use to be determined at the local level;
- incorporate mechanisms to assist in the translation or upscaling of the learnings from innovative practice - both in terms of what worked well and what did not – more broadly across the system.

VCOSS believes that the *Blueprint* needs to be developed as a key part of a broader Victorian and Federal Government social inclusion agenda. In 2007, the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities released its final report, *Social inclusion: The next steps for a fairer Victoria*. This report recommended that there be further development of a strategy which addresses education attainment, retention and re-engagement.³ Both early childhood education and care and compulsory education play a vital role in building human capital and facilitating social inclusion, and so the *Blueprint* could form a key plank in the Government's actions to support this. Such an approach would also link to the Government's framework to address disadvantage, *A fairer Victoria*, and to the Government's work around the National Reform Agenda and the priority area of human capital.

It is critical that the Government follow through on the reforms proposed in the *Blueprint* with a sound implementation strategy. This strategy should detail short, medium and long-term objectives, funding, timelines and evaluation processes. The *Blueprint's* implementation strategy needs to be reinforced with a sustained increased social and economic investment to ensure positive change in the wellbeing, learning, health and development of children and young people and families. The implementation strategy should also be developed in partnership with

the early childhood education care sector, schools and the community and social services sector, drawing on local experience and expertise.

New funding to resource any reforms is equally critical. VCOSS calls on the Government to make the significant additional social and economic investment to make real its commitment to learning, health, development and wellbeing outcomes of Victoria's children and young people.

OVERVIEW – Focus Questions

What other opportunities might exist as a result of the creation of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development?

The creation of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) provides the opportunity to achieve an integrated service system that focuses on equity of opportunity, participation and outcomes for all of Victoria's children and young people.

The *Blueprint* is an important and significant step for DEECD. A key concern however, is that it appears that much is seeking to be covered in the five year implementation period. VCOSS believes that it would be valuable to develop a long-term vision for learning, wellbeing, health and development of Victoria's children and young people to sit alongside and inform the *Blueprint*. Such a vision could incorporate the work that was undertaken in 2006 and 2007 to develop a *Statewide Plan for Victoria's Children*, which was intended to be a comprehensive overview of steps to support and promote the wellbeing of children. Such a vision would need to be across government, and incorporate all services and supports that contribute to promoting the wellbeing of children and young people. While the vision for all Victorian children and young people detailed in the *Blueprint* is strong, this would be strengthened through the development of a longer term vision. There would also be value in including a series of guiding principles for reform both in relation to the *Blueprint* and the new Department.

It is also vital that the *Blueprint* links in with existing legislation and policy frameworks that exist beyond those in within the DEECD's jurisdiction, such as *Growing Victoria Together*, *A Fairer Victoria* and the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005*. The *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act* details a set of core principles for children, defined as 0 – 18 years. There would be significant value in these principles being used as the basis for the development of guiding principles for DEECD and the *Blueprint* reforms, as referred to above.

VCOSS welcomes the emphasis on 'reducing the effects of disadvantage on children and young people's learning and development'. Successfully addressing children's disadvantage requires approaches that are rights based, culture based and strengths based and which reorient service delivery to a focus on prevention and early intervention.⁴

In translating the elements of equity and fairness that are key elements of the Government's *A fairer Victoria* strategy, it is important to recognise that these elements do not just mean equal funding, or even equal access to specific services. Fairness and equity also do not mean the same for everyone, nor do they mean top-down provision of the same services for diverse communities. True equity means culturally-appropriate and community-relevant services that reflect the particular circumstances of each community. It is important to recognise that participation in decision-making by communities, particularly vulnerable communities, requires additional support and training.

To most effectively reduce the impact of disadvantage on the outcomes for children and young people, it is essential for the *Blueprint* reforms to include actions targeting

the improvement of education affordability. Addressing existing cost barriers is inadequately represented in the discussion papers, particularly given that one of the central principles of the document is to reduce the impact of disadvantage on early childhood and education outcomes. For many children and young people, the financial barriers of education continue to reduce their participation and exacerbate their educational disadvantage.

VCOSS remains concerned at the ongoing impact of public school fees on the participation in education by students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. VCOSS members continue to highlight that students are excluded from core education activities and school resources, such as access to computers, because the school has not received payment of fees.

The reliance by schools on fees indicates there are fundamental problems in current school resourcing levels, which have not been addressed through the recent School Resource Package or the initial Blueprint for Government Schools. While issues of equity and the importance of being student-focused have been addressed in the SRP, the lack of any significant increase in the overall resourcing of public education leaves schools with little option but to seek additional resources from their school community.

Schools then become reliant on the economic capacity of their community to contribute to school funding, directly undermining the education outcomes of those students who live in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage. A primary school in Hawthorn may raise in excess of \$100,000 at their annual fete while across town in Thornbury, a school community struggles to run a fete at all. Schools in regional areas can find it particularly difficult to raise additional funds due to the significant financial and social impacts of the current drought.

VCOSS believes all public schools should be resourced to a level that enables them to provide a well-rounded learning program across the eight key learning areas for all students, regardless of the level of socioeconomic disadvantage in an area. The *Blueprint* presents a new opportunity to drive improvements that ensure that socioeconomic disadvantage is not a barrier to improved education outcomes.

VCOSS is a member of the Equity in Education Alliance, an informal group of community sector organisations brought together by VCOSS. At present, the central goal of the Alliance is that:

The cost of compulsory education should not be a barrier to the full and meaningful participation of any / all Victorian students.

VCOSS endorses the view of the Equity in Education Alliance that the *Blueprint* needs to achieve the following objectives:

- Each student should be able to access the same level of opportunities regardless of what form of compulsory education they are in;
- Parents/carers/families/students should not contribute financially for any learning program across the eight key learning areas;
- Funding for schools and funding allocations within schools should be guided by principles of inclusiveness and equity, and policies should enforce these principles; and

- ❑ Poverty should not disadvantage a student and their family from participating fully and equally in school life.

VCOSS believes the *Blueprint* provides an opportunity to not only improve the educational outcomes of children and young people who experience disadvantage, but also address the huge impact that the cost of education is having on Victorian children, young people and families.

There is also a clear need for longer-term core resourcing to be provided for early childhood services and schools. Currently they must devote significant time to seeking additional funding to enable them to continue delivering innovative programs so as to better support and promote the learning, wellbeing, health and development of children and young people. This is time that could be more effectively directed towards achieving the objectives of the school or service, including being better able to provide the additional supports to those children and young people who are vulnerable and / or who experience disadvantage.

In the *Blueprint* discussion papers there is a noticeable lack of an explicit recognition of the social context for children and young people, and an absence of equity principles. Greater recognition of the social context that children and young people are in is required to ensure that the *Blueprint* drives the required reforms to support children and young people who are vulnerable and / or who experience disadvantage. Identifying that schools and early childhood education and care services need to develop stronger linkages with other supports provided by community sector organisations so as to ensure that the right mix of support is placed around a family where there may be a parent with substance abuse issues and/or a mental illness, where there may be family violence or the family experiencing financial stress, which in turn strains family relationships. The context of climate change and drought is particularly relevant here as it is clear that specific strategies are required to support families and communities experiencing the effects of climate change and drought, and the resulting stress and pressures this places on the learning and development of children and young people.

The creation of DEECD presents the opportunity to deliver a holistic and inclusive approach to children, young people and their families. DEECD, through both the *Blueprint* and other policy mechanisms, needs to ensure that there is a culture of inclusion and integrated service delivery across all sectors, participants and systems. There needs to be a whole-of-government approach and the *Blueprint* needs to reflect this. There are two key elements to achieving a stronger whole-of-government approach, in addition to the welcomed emphasis and focus on integration and linkages across service types that is evident in the *Blueprint*. The first relates to the need for improved integration and linkages and to improvements in the way government (including the Department) works in the area of planning and coordination. Integrated policy, planning, service delivery and resource allocation processes need to be better integrated at the state, regional and local level. The second relates to the importance of DEECD, particularly through the *Blueprint*, drawing on and working alongside other initiatives, such as Neighbourhood Renewal, Transport Connections, and departments, particularly the Department of Human Services, Department of Planning and Community Development and the Department of Transport.

It is also critical that DEECD draw on a community development framework to facilitate integration both across service types and along the service continuum (from prevention – early intervention – secondary – tertiary), whether this be through the development of Children’s Centres or through other mechanisms. The underlying objectives of community development are about social, economic and environmental outcomes of a community and its members, and that the way to achieve these is to focus effort on creating stronger communities through enhancing connectedness, engagement and partnership between various stakeholders in the community.

Community development also needs to be mainstreamed across government and needs to be universally applied across government programs and not be seen as ‘something for disadvantaged communities’. Further work is required to imbed and make clearer the links between community development and service system priorities in the context of the *Blueprint* – it needs to be explicit that community development is a central component in the how services and education is delivered, – that it assists in achieving desired outcomes. For example, in the early years context, community strengthening depends essentially on engaging families directly in setting priorities appropriate to their community or neighbourhood, providing adequate resources to enable and support them to participate actively in the planning process, where Government sets clear policy guidelines and desired outcomes but allows for flexibility in the ways different communities achieve those outcomes at the local level.⁵

Further, with the focus of the new Department firmly on the development of an integrated approach to learning, development, health and wellbeing, there is now the opportunity to recognise and draw on the skills and expertise of the community sector. The community sector needs to become a valued partner of DEECD, particularly in relation to the role of the sector in meeting the social and wellbeing outcomes of children, young people and their families.

Are the individual improvement targets realistic and sufficiently challenging?

VCOSS welcomes the inclusion of improvement targets within the *Blueprint*, as the targets will be able to be used as a key lever in driving the required reforms and improve early childhood and educational outcomes for children and young people.

VCOSS endorses the developmental and lifecycle approach to the learning, health and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people adopted in the *Blueprint*. It is of concern that a number of the indicators are related to specific service delivery outcomes. These outcomes are quite generic and assume that children and young people learn and develop at the same rate and along the same path. There is a danger that these generalisations and indicators will disadvantage marginalised children and young people and cause them to fall further behind their peers.

One criticism that has been raised by VCOSS members is why are the expectations for certain groups of children and young people, such as Indigenous students, so low? The *Blueprint* provides the opportunity to aim high and provide the motivation for improvement and lifelong learning for children, young people and educators. Chris Sarra, in his report to the DEECD *Review of Educational Outcomes for*

Indigenous Students, highlighted that high expectations for Indigenous Students are critical.

To achieve many of the targets, an integrated cross-government approach is required. For example, the target, 'reduce the proportion of children entering school with emotional and behavioural problems', will not be achievable unless preventative and early intervention supports are fully accessible in a timely and sustained way. This improvement target will require a genuine investment in additional early intervention family support services, primary health services, and mental health supports, as supporting children with emotional and behavioural problems and their families cannot simply be done in isolation by early childhood workers. Further, strong cross-government linkages will be required, particularly between DEECD and the Department of Human Services (DHS). There needs to be recognition within the *Blueprint* that a range of factors impact on the behaviour and emotional wellbeing of children, and that stemming from this, targeted intervention to support children and families in the communities within which they live are required, whether this be through targeted family support services, access to affordable housing, transport or family violence supports.

It is important that the improvement targets do not neither establish an environment where it is viewed as unacceptable for a child with a behavioural condition to participate, nor prevent the provision of support

The improvement targets would also be strengthened through the provision of clearer definitions that are used in the improvement targets.

As a set, are the improvement targets comprehensive and do they address the right outcomes?

A key gap in the performance measures and improvement targets is that they fail to address equity and access to education for all children, regardless of their background, socio-economic status or ability.

While the *Blueprint* focuses on system reform, there are no specific improvement targets to monitor system change, rather the current improvement targets measure that outcomes that the system will achieve. It is critical that targets to measure the implementation of the *Blueprint* is included so as to best monitor progress.

The improvement targets, and the *Blueprint* as a whole, utilises a mainstream lens in its emphasis on improving the performance and participation of children and young people. There is a lack of emphasis and inclusion of improvement targets that focus on alternative pathways and models of education.

Are there other improvement targets we should consider?

VCOSS believes there would be significant value to be gained in the *Blueprint* drawing more directly from the work that developed the *Victorian Child and Adolescent Outcomes Framework*. This framework, which was intended to be a cross-government framework, should be drawn upon not only in the development of the improvement targets, but also as a platform for integrated planning.

There are other important pieces of work that also need to be drawn upon and clear linkages established in the development of the improvement targets. The *Framework for Vulnerable Young People*, which is currently under development by DHS, would be an important resource. Linkages of the targets to the two government reports, the State of Victoria's Children and the State of Victoria's Young People, would also be valuable. Such steps would enable the development of improvement targets that provide a cross-government and community picture of the outcomes for Victorian children and young people.

VCOSS believes that a range of improvement targets that specifically relate to the outcomes for children who are experiencing disadvantage and children with additional needs need to be included. These vulnerable children are often at-risk of being excluded or disengaged from education and may not engage in early childhood services. This group of children require targeted interventions – the inclusion of specific improvement targets would assist in driving improved outcomes for them. There needs to be a clear direction within the *Blueprint* that schools and early childhood services do have responsibility for vulnerable children. Specific improvement targets, which are linked to on the ground accountability, for this group of children and young people need to be included in the *Blueprint*.

VCOSS is concerned that while there is a welcomed focus on Indigenous children and children with emotional and behavioural problems, there are no specific improvement targets relating to other vulnerable groups of children, such as children and young people in out-of-home care or those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. An example of a possible improvement target would be 'to improve the literacy and numeracy outcomes for refugee and newly arrived children

and young people'. VCOSS would welcome the introduction of improvement targets relating to these groups of children and young people.

An improvement target that would pick-up on some of the issues for these vulnerable groups of children and young people would be 'reducing absenteeism / suspensions / expulsions / inter-school transfers, particularly for children with a disability, learning difficulties or challenging behaviours or children in out-of-home care'. Anecdotal evidence highlights that it is often these children and young people who will eventually become disengaged with education and have poorer educational outcomes. Recent research undertaken by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare with children in out-of-home care highlights that many young people who have been in care leave formal schooling at a relatively young age – with 47% of young people surveyed leaving school before the age of 16.⁶ Through including such improvement targets, there will be a greater emphasis on improving school retention and delivering enhanced supports for these vulnerable children and young people, thereby, generating improved outcomes.

VCOSS believes that additional targets that include the voices of children and young people would significantly strengthen the targets. Children and young people have a right to participate in determining their own educational outcomes and they also can provide a service user perspective. In a document that aims to reform the education system and improve outcomes for all young Victorians it is vital that their input is valued and considered, otherwise the Blueprint will not resonate with the very group that is being affected.

VCOSS also believes that additional targets are required that incorporate a focus on the role of community sector organisations. The community sector provides vital services and supports for children, young people and families, particularly those who are vulnerable. However while the *Blueprint* places an emphasis on developing community links, there are no specific improvement targets to drive this. VCOSS would welcome the opportunity to work with DEECD in the development of more comprehensive improvement targets.

The *Blueprint* has a targeted focus on the importance of transitions, however this also is not reflected in the improvement targets. The transition out of compulsory education is not measured. While there is an improvement target focusing on improving the Year 12 completion rate, there is no emphasis on students participating in further education, employment and training once they leave school, whether this be at Year 12 or earlier. *OnTrack* would enable the easy collection of this data. An improvement target that could be included would be to 'increase the percentage of students involved in education / employment / training after leaving school by 50% (within the first 3 months from leaving school)'. Given that in the *School Reform Discussion Paper* the proposals concerning pathways and transitions from school aim to expand school responsibility for young people's pathways until they complete Year 12 or equivalent or turn 19, an indicator such as this provides a way of ensure that this aim is followed through.

Early Childhood Development – Focus questions

In addition to the emphasis on parents and communities, VCOSS believes that the Blueprint requires a much stronger emphasis on partnerships between schools and community sector organisations.

It is increasingly recognised that harnessing the best of both government and the community sector is vital to achieving sustainable change in an increasingly complex environment. To achieve this, it is necessary to build platforms of relationships by creating spaces for meaningful collaboration, networks and partnering across and within both the community sector and government, including schools.⁷

To address the social needs of children and young people, it is critical that early childhood services and schools are networked and integrated with a range of other community services and structures.

Strong collaboration is a key element of successful service delivery partnering relationships, as it improves both government flexibility and effectiveness, and enhances the economic performance of cities and regions.⁸ Maintaining collaborative relationships in an ongoing manner optimises the effectiveness of collaborative work around specific issues when they arise, enabling ways forward to be identified more quickly, minimising any disruptions, and thereby strengthening outcomes achieved.

A central learning to date has been that developing and maintaining any partnering relationship is resource intensive. Significant staff time and other resources are required to develop effective collaborations, networks and partnering to achieve improved outcomes for communities. To enable and strengthening partnering relationships, additional funding to specific service delivery funding is required. Structures and incentives within the system that reward when organisations collaborate are also required.

Partnerships with parents and communities – Children thriving in supportive home and local environments

Is the focus of the reform proposals to support parents to create the best possible home environment right?

‘Investing in children’s early years, giving parents the help they need to raise their families and ensuring our most vulnerable young children and vulnerable young people receive the support they need – when they need it – are amongst the most important things that this Government can do.’⁹

The early years are the foundation blocks for lifelong learning, development, health and wellbeing. VCOSS welcomes the recognition that parents play a crucial role at this time in their children’s life.

The *Blueprint* presents an exciting opportunity to create an integrated system where children are at the centre of policy and service provision and their families are supported. For families who are experiencing disadvantage there needs to be supports that assist in strengthening parental capacity, particularly when families are going through episodes of decreased capacity. Responses need to be timely and holistic and work with the entire family.

VCOSS supports the emphasis on building partnerships with parents to create supportive home environments. VCOSS believes the *Blueprint* needs to include a stronger emphasis on addressing the complexity of engaging with and meeting the needs of vulnerable families, particularly Indigenous families and refugee, newly arrived and other CALD families. It is also important that the *Blueprint* acknowledges that it is not possible to consider parents separately to communities – this is particularly so for Indigenous families and communities.

Indigenous children continue to have poorer health and wellbeing than non-Indigenous children. This is exacerbated by services that aren't meeting Indigenous children's needs:

- ❑ Aboriginal children and families continue to be under represented in universal and preventative services, including family services;
- ❑ Very few service responses for older children and young adolescents or therapeutic services to assist vulnerable Aboriginal families are in place; and
- ❑ Services that are available don't meet the specific needs of Aboriginal children, young people, and families because of the lack of sufficient Aboriginal-specific family services and culturally responsive generalist services.¹⁰

Currently, too many Indigenous families receive no support until issues reach crisis point. As such, VCOSS welcomes the emphasis of the reform proposals to improve supports provided to parents.

Many Indigenous families are often wary of interacting with both schools and the service system. It is critical that specific supports and initiatives be developed to ensure that these families are both supported to engage, and that schools and other services ensure they are culturally-sensitive and provide culturally relevant services

VCOSS welcomes the Government's *Wannik* strategy, and believes that the implementation plan for the *Blueprint* must link directly with the *Wannik* implementation plan.

In the early years, a range of approaches and initiatives are required to better support the learning, wellbeing, health and development outcomes of Indigenous children and young people. Two valuable steps that would build on existing successful initiative would be:

- ❑ build on the VAEAI in-home support program, which provides support to mothers with young babies in their homes.
- ❑ Extend the availability of Koori Maternity Services. Koori Maternity Services have led to more Indigenous women accessing antenatal care earlier in pregnancy and increased confidence and active participation in pregnancy care, childbirth and early parenting.

Home-visiting from early childhood staff to new parents, whether through maternal and child health nurses, kindergarten teachers or other early years professionals, has the potential to provide focused support in a non-threatening and positive way. Home visiting can also assist in connecting families to a range of community supports, including parents' groups, activities in a neighbourhood house etc. Additional resources are required to enable such home-visiting to be incorporated as a core part of work of early years professionals.

Supported playgroups, particularly those that are working with vulnerable families – such as the Best Start playgroups, also play a valuable role in both parenting and child development outcomes. The role of playgroups as part of an integrated system is not adequately addressed in the *Blueprint*.

It is critical that support for families to create the best possible home environment is provided in an integrated way, with seamless provision of supports along the prevention – early intervention – secondary – tertiary service continuum. Support for families cannot be done in isolation, with a focus on one type of service support – it needs to be in conjunction with a range of supports, such as housing, mental health services, family support services, transport, education and training, employment and income support.

Is the focus of the reform proposals to provide outcomes-focused information right?

VCOSS supports the increased provision of consistent information to both services and families.

Families require access to information in a variety of ways, whether that is through the Maternal and Child Health Nurse, early childhood service providers, GPs, online, face to face discussions or printed materials in a variety of languages and formats. Information about learning, development, health and wellbeing needs to be provided to families in a targeted and accessible way and must be ability, culturally and linguistically appropriate. Ongoing information also needs to respect adult learning styles. The reform proposals detailed in the *Blueprint* also provide the opportunity to improve adult literacy through the provision of high quality information and supports to parents, leading to parents and children obtaining improved literacy outcomes.

The *Blueprint* equates information about service providers with increased parental choice. However, VCOSS is concerned that the policy of maximising choice could result in the greater polarisation between socially marginalised families who lack the resources to make real choices. There is also the concern that greater choice will lead to an increase in private for-profit service provision. This is a key concern for VCOSS as we do not believe that the required levels of quality exist in many for-profit services. Indeed, the evidence to date is that greater choice does not lead to greater quality in services. VCOSS believes that the *Blueprint* should focus on ensuring that all Victorian children and families are able to access high quality, non-profit services in the communities that they live.

Do you agree with our reform proposals to strengthen local service planning, coordination and delivery?

VCOSS welcomes the proposals to strengthen local service planning, coordination and delivery. There is a need for the development of a cohesive, integrated, well-funded and widespread approach to service delivery that draws on local mechanisms of planning and delivery.

The central importance of ensuring universal access to services in supporting and promoting the wellbeing, learning, health and development of children and young people and their families needs to be clearer in the *Blueprint*. Alongside this, it is critical to make more explicit the connection between universal and targeted or specialist services – they are two sides of the same coin, and ensure better linkages across these. Universal services can provide the platform for the delivery of targeted or specialist services. In the early years area, maternal and child health services, child care services, kindergartens and schools are often the only institution or service that families have contact with. Each of these can be better utilised as an effective platform to ensure that vulnerable children and families are linked in with the appropriate additional supports as and when required.

An intentional focus is required to strengthen local service planning, coordination and delivery. Strong linkages across the range of universal and specialist services are required to support and promote the wellbeing, learning, health and development of children and young people. Teachers and other professionals cannot be expected to do this in addition to their core role, and nor do many of them have the relationship building, facilitation, mediation and brokering skills required. A key step to include in the *Blueprint* is the establishment of a social outcomes broker – a community development styled worker – who would work at the local level to facilitate and build linkages between parents, schools, early childhood services and other the services provided by community organisations (such as family support, housing assistance, mental health services, domestic violence services etc). The social outcomes broker could be based either in schools, early childhood services, or a within a local community sector organisation. VCOSS is currently doing some further thinking around the role of the social outcomes broker with some of our member organisations, including how it would be framed and what it would look like. We will share this work with DEECD once it is completed.

The critical role of community sector organisations in supporting and promoting the wellbeing, learning, health and development of children and young people needs to be more explicit in the *Blueprint*. Community sector organisations are a key source of in-depth knowledge and experience of the policies and practices that work well to achieve improved outcomes for children, young people and families.

The *Blueprint* includes a considerable reliance on local government playing a key role. VCOSS is concerned at this reliance, given the inconsistencies in local government early childhood resourcing levels, as it means that the accessibility of services is reliant on local government investment. It is important that the *Blueprint* initiates consistent service provision, particularly in growth areas, as well as in rural and regional Victoria.

The *Blueprint* needs to incorporate increased and strengthened accountability of the Department for local service planning and coordination. Such steps need to include

systemic changes to facilitate and enable the ongoing participation of DEECD regional offices in integrated approaches.

System development and reform – Families accessing connected services

Do you agree with our reform proposals to improve seamless delivery of 0–8 learning, care and health services?

VCOSS strongly supports the seamless and integrated delivery of learning, care and health services.

Early childhood education and care services, from the prenatal period to the first years of school, are now well-recognised as critical to supporting children’s healthy development and for their development as healthy, well functioning adults.¹¹

To function effectively, the spectrum of services that respond to infants, children and parents need to work much closer together. These linkages are the key to ensuring that vulnerable children do not fall through the net. Strong linkages are required between:

- universal services offered to all children, such as maternal and child health, playgroups, early education and care services and primary schools;
- specialist early intervention services, such as those that assist children with developmental delays and/or a disability and general family support services;
- secondary support services, such as more intensive family support services; and
- tertiary end intensive services, such as Family Support Innovations Projects, foster and residential care services.

Clear actions are required to break down the historic structures, traditional rivalries and professional boundaries between early childhood education, health, and care professionals. The *Blueprint* provides this important opportunity.

The integration within the early childhood education and care sector itself, as well as with the broader education system and the community is also about more than actions. Language plays an important role in facilitating integration. It is unfortunate that the *Blueprint* discussion papers use inconsistent language, particularly in relation to early childhood education and care. VCOSS would welcome the use of the term ‘early childhood education and care’ in relation to early years services, such as kindergarten and child care.

VCOSS believes that a redefinition of term ‘kindergarten’ is required, if this term is to be continued to be the preferred language. While we understand that the Victorian Government only is responsible for funding ‘kindergarten’, we believe there needs to be a redefinition of what kindergarten is, particularly as the common community perception is this kindergarten in 10 hours of learning delivered in a sessional setting. As kindergarten is now delivered in a diverse range of settings, such as in a long day care centre or a sessional kindergarten, we believe that the *Blueprint* needs to assist in the redefinition of kindergarten in the minds of the community.

The 0-8 Networks that are proposed in the *Blueprint* should focus on integration across the full range of early childhood services. The Networks should include the provision of training, networking and mentoring without requiring participating services to surrender the ownership and governance of their services. These Networks also need to be accompanied by resourcing to facilitate the network's development and sustainability. An existing example is that of the Primary Care Partnerships, where funding is included for resourcing and networking.

Consideration should also be given to the development of alternate governance models, such as network governance. Network governance is a sound model for developing new governance arrangements at the local level. "Network governance ... involves multiple public and private actors collaborating in some way to further key social, environmental and economic concerns."¹² New forms of network governance 'offer a stronger model of local public administration because they have an ability to:

- Respond flexibly to local conditions,
- Achieve lower regulatory costs by stimulating collective action,
- Reduce transaction costs associated with fragmented service delivery, and
- Increase legitimacy through increased participation in decision making."¹³

These new forms of network governance involve five elements: partnerships, a focus on place-based initiatives, the intention to promote participation and inclusion, the willingness to decentralise public services, and a plan to enhance local economic competitiveness."¹⁴

Also critical, is both the recognition of the importance of including Commonwealth childcare within initiatives aimed at strengthening the integration of children's services, and ensuring improved access to kindergarten. VCOSS welcomes the commitment of the *Blueprint* to work in partnership with the Commonwealth Government.

VCOSS has welcomed the establishment of the Children's Centres. Further steps are required to ensure true integration across services provided at Children's Centres, as co-location in itself does not achieve integration. Also, the *Blueprint* needs to include the development of virtual as well as actual children's hubs, where a wide range of support services for families and children collaborate to provide coordinated services.

In addition to improved service linkages, concentrated effort is required to improve linkages and collaboration both within the new department, and between the new department and the Department of Human Services. A strong emphasis is required on ensuring that early childhood education, care and health services are accessible – including affordable, provided in a timely and sustained way, high quality and responsive to children's and families' needs. The *Blueprint* is an important step in this direction.

The sharing and collection of information between services and systems is central to the proposals in this section of the discussion paper. VCOSS believes that steps are needed to coordinate the paperwork that many families are required to complete across the early childhood and school system, particularly families who have a child with a disability. Completion of this paperwork is not only time consuming for families and services, but it is also costly as specialist medical reports and assessments are

often required. If information systems were coordinated, this burden would be reduced.

Do you agree with our reform proposals to increase access, affordability and the level of participation in services?

The OECD report, *Starting Strong*, noted that too many Australian children aged three and four are being left behind at an age critical for brain development.¹⁵ VCOSS welcomes the *Blueprint's* emphasis on increasing access, affordability and participation in early childhood services.

The reform proposals have a considerable emphasis on improving access, affordability and participation in kindergarten. VCOSS welcomes this and recent initiatives to improve kindergarten affordability, particularly for low income Victorians. VCOSS believes further action is required to address the other factors that prevent children from participating in kindergarten, including children with additional needs, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and Indigenous children.¹⁶ Such a focus is particularly important for the 5% of children that the *Blueprint* appears to suggest are too hard to engage in kindergarten, such as children with a disability or children in out-of-home care, a clear strategy needs to be developed to engage and support these children and their families. Given the evidence of the value of participation in kindergarten, the *Blueprint* needs to be aiming for all children to attend kindergarten – it is a key universal service.

In addition to addressing these factors, the *Blueprint* more broadly needs to drive strategies that will engage 'invisible' and highly vulnerable children in the service system. The evidence demonstrates that the outcomes for these children will improve significantly as a result of participating.

As noted earlier, parents, particularly those who are experiencing disadvantage, require focused supports and resources to enable their children to maximise their participation in early childhood education and care services. Strategies that address the range of barriers to participation in early childhood services, such as geographic location and lack of transport, are required – otherwise many families will be unable to participate.

Is the focus of the reform proposals to enhance early intervention for children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with additional needs, such as disability or development delay right?

VCOSS endorses the focus in the *Blueprint* on enhancing early intervention supports for children who experience disadvantage and / or who are vulnerable.

The *Blueprint* needs to include the development, as part of a whole-of-government approach, of targeted strategies for children, young people and families who are experiencing disadvantage that exist along a service continuum. Children and families need to be able to access the support they require, when they require it, at any point. Timely access to early intervention services is critical for the wellbeing of children and their families. Currently, this access continues to be limited, with children facing long waiting lists for paediatric allied health and counselling services, and for specialist intervention services.

VCOSS welcomes the inquiry currently being undertaken into early childhood intervention services. We would expect that the key findings and recommendations from this Inquiry are incorporated into the *Blueprint*.

Additional effort is required to better integrate children experiencing disadvantage and children with additional needs into mainstream early childhood education and care services, as this benefits both the individual child in terms of their social and educational development, and the social development of other children. Currently, access to the Kindergarten Inclusion Support Services (KISS) is too restrictive, and children with additional development needs are being excluded because of the strict eligibility guidelines. This places enormous pressures on families, children, staff and committees, and hinders the individual child's development. While VCOSS welcomes the additional KISS places announced in the 2008-09 State Budget, greater investment and expansion is still required.

Workforce reform – Skills and knowledge to deliver for children and families

Is the focus of the reform proposals to establish a high quality workforce right?

VCOSS welcomes the investment in staff skill development and improving qualifications within early childhood services. We also support the development of strengthened Children's Services Regulations and believe that a strong regulatory system will lead to improved outcomes for children.

VCOSS supports the investment in joint professional learning and the development of forums between early childhood services and schools. We would like to the inclusion of the community sector in this learning and in the forums as many community sector professionals are also engaging in valuable work with children and families in the early years area. This would also facilitate mutual learning and sharing of knowledge and resources which would not only benefit the professionals, but also the children and families that they are working with.

SCHOOL REFORM – Focus questions

System development and reform – Creating a culture of excellence

Is the focus of the reform proposals to ensure every child makes good progress right?

VCOSS welcomes the *Blueprint's* proposals focusing on system development and reform. So as to strengthen this, clarification is required as to what a 'culture of excellence' entails and what is the definition of 'good progress'?

A culture of excellence should entail all children and young people being able to access the opportunities to have the experience of creating, exploring and achieving, through the provision of a diverse range of learning and education environments.

Good progress should be about all children and young people achieving their full potential in all areas of learning, health, development and wellbeing, not just in maths, science and languages, again through being able to access a diverse range of learning and education environments.

A culture of excellence and the achievement of good progress for all children will require the centre to enable new systems and structures through the *Blueprint* establishing a central policy framework (as referred to earlier). For example, the management of school resources and learning models will need to be more flexible and include the capacity to be locally-driven so as to more effectively respond to the diversity of need. An effective example of this way of working is that of the deemed enrolment model developed in partnership by St Luke's Anglicare, the regional office of the then Department of Education and Training and the four local secondary colleges in Bendigo that focuses on supporting young people aged 12-15 who are at risk of or who have disengaged from the education system. The objective is to provide a bridge for young people to support them in re-engaging with school or other mainstream educational and vocational based programs. This is achieved through a number of steps including the development of an education plan, formation of a support team and the availability of the funding generated from the young person's enrolment to transferred to St Luke's to develop a range of educational programs to meet the young person's needs. However, currently this program is not fully resourced by the Department, nor recognised as an education program.

A second example of a successful model is that of NetSchool in Bendigo, which provides vulnerable young people with access to continuing their education through the development of centre based and home based learning. NetSchool has developed considerable expertise in supporting young people aged 15 to 19 years to reengage in education. Despite the significant learning outcomes achieved for young people participating at NetSchool, ongoing funding is not guaranteed.

VCOSS believes that the *Blueprint* needs to give particular attention to enabling the provision of more flexible learning environments in the middle and later years of

education for the 10 – 20 per cent of Victorian young people who are disengaged, or at risk of disengaging from the education system. Many of these young people wish to reengage in education, but the opportunities are limited given the issues they face and the need for a high level of educational support. A key element of this needs to be the development of collaborative networks between schools and other sectors to improve the learning outcomes for students, particularly those who experience disadvantage.

VCOSS believes that the development of cross-sector, collaborative networks are a key way to overcome disadvantage. This is particularly so in the area of education: there are significant opportunities to improve learning outcomes through addressing the social factors that negatively impact on a child's or young person's ability to learn. The quality of the child's environment as a whole is important to educational success and improved social outcomes.

Schools are the ideal entry point for the provision of additional support and enabling linkages, as for many families, schools are the only formal institutions that they engage with. However schools are naturally focused primarily on the educational needs of children and young people. To address the social needs of children and young people, it is critical that schools are networked and integrated with a range of other community services and structures. Such new approaches are required to enable the improved integration of education and broader community organisations and structures.

Is the focus of the reform proposals to improve transition to and from schools right?

VCOSS welcomes the recognition in the *Blueprint* of the importance of transitions. It is critical that this recognition and focus moves beyond a primary focus on the transition from early years services into school. The transition from primary school to secondary schools needs to be addressed, as does the transition from secondary school into post-school opportunities.

The Transition Plans from early childhood services into school will provide a solid support for both children and teachers, enabling schools to draw on the knowledge base of early childhood services and professionals. Schools also need to have confidence that the transition plans are accurate. Transition plans need to be accompanied with release time for teachers and early childhood professionals so that they can take the time to meet and discuss individual children's learning and development needs and plan appropriately.

The transition from primary school to secondary school is an important milestone, however there is limited emphasis on this transition in the *Blueprint*. There needs to be specific support to assist children, families and schools in this transition period, particularly in relation to the transfer of information between educators, as well as a comprehensive and integrated process developed.

VCOSS supports the emphasis on post-school transitions in the *Blueprint*. To support the achievement of the aim to expand school responsibility for young people's pathways until they complete Year 12 or equivalent or turn 19, it is important that

specific strategies be put in place to further support young people as they make the transition from compulsory education and into further education, employment and training.

Do you agree with our reform proposals to increase expectations and provide greater support for government schools?

VCOSS welcomes increased supports for government schools. In particular we would like to see increased financial supports for government schools, particularly in relation to underperforming schools or schools who are in economically disadvantaged locations. As the recent Victorian Auditor-General's report, *Improving our Schools: Monitoring and Support* highlighted, most schools that are performing below expected levels are faced with highly challenging circumstances, including higher percentages of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and high numbers of children with special learning needs or challenging behaviors.¹⁷

The Auditor-General's report also highlights particular challenges at the regional office level. These include a lack of and uneven distribution of resourcing, further compounding the concentration of schools performing below expected levels in a number of regions.

VCOSS advocates these disparities are addressed through the Government's targeting of poor performing schools, and that the Blueprint be used as a mechanism to drive the required changes.

While accountability measures are being refined for government schools, there is limited accountability in relation to achieving individual student's learning outcomes. The recently released *Wannik: Learning Together* strategy to improve the educational outcomes for Indigenous students highlights the importance of individual learning plans for Indigenous students. The Program for Students with a Disability also requires the development of individual education plans. VCOSS believes that it would be valuable for the *Blueprint* to include the introduction of individual learning plans for all students that are clearly linked to accountability.

VCOSS supports the development of clear standards for what students and parents can expect from all government schools. This is particularly important in relation to children and young people who are experiencing disadvantage, as they need to know that they will have equity of access to education, at the same level as their peers, regardless of their families capacity to pay. This is why, as previously discussed, we believe that affordability of education needs to be addressed in the Blueprint.

Do you agree with our reform proposals to establish clearer expectations and provide greater support for non-government schools?

VCOSS believes that all schools, whether they be government or non-government schools, need to support all students and that their needs to be consistent outcomes for all Victorian students, regardless of the setting that their education is being delivered in.

Workforce reform – The best people doing the right things

Is the focus of the reform proposals to further develop teachers and school leaders right?

Do you agree with our reform proposals to attract and reward the best people?

VCOSS believes the *Blueprint* needs to include greater pre-service training and professional development for teachers and school leaders is required to enable them to work effectively with and support a diverse range of children, young people and their families, including Indigenous children, children with a disability, and children from refugee backgrounds. This training also needs to address what makes a successful learner and acknowledge that children and young people have a diverse range of learning styles and learning needs.

VCOSS believes the *Blueprint* requires a greater emphasis on engaging specialist support staff to work alongside teachers to ensure children and young people's learning, health, development and wellbeing is supported. Support staff and services, whether they be internal or external to schools, need to be accessible to children and young people and ensure that they are receiving timely and response support from specialist children's services, community and health services. These specialist support staff would have a complementary set of skills to what teachers have – focusing on mediation and relationship building both with students, parents, schools, early childhood services and the broader community. These support staff and services would also support teachers to be able to focus on learning.

Further, schools and teachers are naturally focused primarily on the educational needs of children and young people. To best address the social needs of children and young people, it is critical that schools are networked and integrated with a range of other community services and structures. Such new approaches are required in the *Blueprint* to enable the improved integration of education and broader community organisations and structures, so as to achieve improved outcomes for children and young people.

Partnerships with parents and communities – Partnerships for learning

In addition to the emphasis on parents and communities, VCOSS believes that the *Blueprint* requires a much stronger emphasis on partnerships between schools and community sector organisations.

It is increasingly recognised that harnessing the best of both government and the community sector is vital to achieving sustainable change in an increasingly complex environment. To achieve this, it is necessary to build platforms of relationships by creating spaces for meaningful collaboration, networks and partnering across and within both the community sector and government, including schools.¹⁸

The evidence highlights that a child's or young person's learning does not occur in isolation from the other parts of their life. However the traditional school structure, model and approach responds as if this is the case. The collective challenge that the *Blueprint* needs to address is to identify and develop collaborative networks between schools and other sectors to improve the learning outcomes for students, particularly those who experience disadvantage.

VCOSS believes that the development of cross-sector, collaborative networks are a key way to overcome disadvantage. This is particularly so in the area of education: there are significant opportunities to improve learning outcomes through addressing the social factors that negatively impact on a child's or young person's ability to learn. The quality of the child's environment as a whole is important to educational success and improved social outcomes. The *Blueprint* needs to drive the development of cross-sector, collaborative networks so as to enable the improved integration of education and broader community organisations and structures.

Is the focus of the reform proposals to better partner with parents and families right?

VCOSS welcomes the focus on partnering with parents and families. Within this focus, VCOSS believes that there needs to be greater attention to those families, who are reluctant or who are not particularly engaged in their child's education. It is essential that the *Blueprint* drive new models around how schools will reach out to these often hard to reach families and support them to be able to build on their capacity to engage. As part of any new models and ways of working to engage vulnerable families, it is critical that there is an emphasis on schools working in partnership with community sector organisations through the development of collaborative networks.

VCOSS is also concerned about those children whose parents are unable to be engaged in their education. The *Blueprint* needs to drive the development of support mechanisms to ensure that these children and young people are not disadvantaged in their educational experience due to a lack of parent involvement, and ensure that carers and other significant people in the child or young person's life can be engaged.

VCOSS also believes that the *Blueprint* needs to include a greater emphasis on the importance of not for profit, community owned Outside School Hours Care services within schools and the value that these services provide in supporting children, young people and families. Mechanisms are required to drive the engagement of principals, school councils and other sponsors of OSHC services in the not for profit, community owned provision of OSHC.

Partnering with parents in the early and middle years of education is often easier to facilitate, as children and young people are perhaps more eager for their parents to participate and engage in their educational experience. The *Blueprint* needs to inform ways in which schools will engage parents in the later years of secondary school in a way that draws on the experience of parents, while still empowering young people as independent learners.

It is important that the *Blueprint* also addresses how to better partner with children and young people in their own learning and educational experience. It appears that the voices of children and young people are not included in the *Blueprint*. For example, for many children and young people, particularly those who are in out-of-home care, they are independent to their parents. Therefore they are often the key determinant of their own educational outcomes. It is vital that they are engaged in the decisions that impact on them and their experiences. In the development and implementation of the *Blueprint*, VCOSS directs the Government to the submissions of the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, the Victorian Student Representative Council and the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and urges the Government to work with each of them to ensure that the *Blueprint* captures the vision of children and young people in relation to their education experience.

VCOSS welcomes the proposal to ensure that schools are welcoming for families, however it is critical that the *Blueprint* set the framework for ensuring that this includes families who experience disadvantage. It is vital that it is not only the schools that are welcoming to families and children experiencing disadvantage but that other parents and the broader school communities are welcoming as well. VCOSS members highlight that too often families from diverse backgrounds are marginalised and confronted with negative stereotypes. VCOSS believes the *Blueprint* needs to challenge these assumptions and drive forward the creation of an equitable and welcoming system for all children and young people who experience disadvantage and their families. One component of this could be the delivery of cross-cultural training for the school community on a variety of issues including Indigenous culture, cultural diversity and disability.

Alongside ensuring schools are welcoming for families and students, it is essential to ensure that they are accessible to people of all abilities. Significant resources need to be allocated to ensure that this occurs.

VCOSS has some concerns about the reliance on the Ultranet as a way of partnering with parents and families. This is based on the assumptions that families not only have access to a computer and the internet, but that they also have the technological competence and literacy levels to be able to engage with the Ultranet. If the Ultranet is going to be used as a comprehensive tool for partnering with families, then considerable resources need to be invested in this program to provide families with access to the technology. This could be done through the provision of computers and the internet in homes or through having specific locations within schools for parents

to be able to access the Ultranet in a supported way at a time that is convenient for them. Accompanying these resources also needs to be a community education strategy to build up the capacity of parents to be able to utilise the Ultranet. If strategies such as these are not put in place, then families who are experiencing disadvantage will automatically be excluded from partnership opportunities.

Do you agree with our reform proposals to utilise and mobilise community resources?

VCOSS supports the commitment in the *Blueprint* to partner with the community and use schools as community resources. VCOSS strongly supports improving the linkages between schools, communities and broader community supports and organisations. We would also like to see a greater emphasis on building stronger relationships with the Commonwealth. VCOSS welcomes the reform proposals that are detailed in the *Blueprint*.

VCOSS believes that new approaches are required to enable the improved integration of education and broader community organisations and structures, and believes the new Department offers new possibilities to strengthen linkages and collaboration. As noted earlier, the development of cross-sector, collaborative networks are a key way to overcome disadvantage. This is particularly so in the area of education: there are significant opportunities to improve learning outcomes through addressing the social factors that negatively impact on a child's or young person's ability to learn. The quality of the child's environment as a whole is important to educational success and improved social outcomes.

Schools are the ideal entry point for the provision of additional support and enabling linkages, as for many families, schools are the only formal institutions that they engage with.¹⁹ However schools are naturally focused primarily on the educational needs of children and young people. To address the social needs of children and young people, it is critical that schools are networked and integrated with a range of other community services and structures.

One of the key values of collaborative networks is that through linking different sectors they foster social inclusion and strengthen community involvement. Through schools being networked with a range of other community and social services, they are able to respond proactively to the increasing concentrations of disadvantage and better support the education and social needs of children and young people. Such steps help ensure that all students are provided with opportunities to have the experience of creating, exploring and achieving despite the level of disadvantage that some also experience.

A number of enabling factors are required to better utilise and mobilise community resources, the following factors that are explored below need to be addressed in the *Blueprint*.

The development of collaborative networks that are focused on supporting and enabling the learning outcomes of all students, particularly those who experience disadvantage, is the first enabling factor. The development of such networks requires two key steps. Firstly, it is vital to draw together the full range of resources that affect

the learning and development of children. Such a step is critical as the evidence highlights that the quality of a child's or young person's environment as a whole – at home, in care, at school, in the community – is central to supporting their learning and development. The second step is ensuring the management of school resources and learning models are more flexible and include the capacity to be locally-driven so as to more effectively respond to the diversity of need. The wider networks that are proposed in the *Blueprint* need to be adequately resourced to assist in the development and the sustainability of the network. The Primary Care Partnerships that are funded by DHS are an example that could be drawn on in the development of the *Blueprint*.

The second enabling factor is the development of new ways of working that give privilege to innovation. Such steps require all stakeholders, including government, accepting that everything tried will not be successful, and that – importantly – there will be learnings to be gained from these as well as the successful initiatives. To enable this, mechanisms need to be established that enable case studies of what works and what hasn't been effective to be shared across the community, education and government sectors. This is why it is important that there is an evaluative component to the *Blueprint*, so that progress and learnings can be tracked and documented.

The establishment of mechanisms to enable the sharing of learnings across the community, education and government sectors is the third enabling factor. The establishment of mechanisms at the state, regional and local level are required which enable intentional dialogue between the community sector, schools, other education and training organisations, local governments and the State Government. Research and the work of VCOSS around the implementation of the Victorian Government's *A fairer Victoria* framework, highlights the key value and importance of both formal and informal mechanisms and structures that bring a range of sectors together. There are a wide range of mechanisms that can be implemented. In the first instance, intentional opportunities are critical, such as local, regional and statewide seminars to facilitate the learnings to date of particular initiatives, which includes organisations presenting examples of their own work from which wider application can be made to other's work.

Lastly, the *Blueprint* needs to clearly articulate a broad direction and which enables local flexibility and adaptability. The *Blueprint* should provide a broad direction with minimum specifications, and should:

- clearly establish the direction of change with defined broad outcome goals;
- establish targets and specify core evaluation requirements based around these broad outcome goals;
- explicitly allow for innovation and experimentation with cause and effect;
- set boundaries that cannot be crossed by any implementation strategy;
- allocate resources, but without specifying how they should be used – resource use to be determined at the local level;
- incorporate mechanisms to assist in the translation or upscaling of the learnings from innovative practice - both in terms of what worked well and what did not – more broadly across the system.

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